

True Education is Beautiful

Daniel Buck

replying to [The Editors's piece](#)

Features

07.14.2020

American Mind

What is to be done?

"The object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful."

—Socrates 380 B.C. (Republic 403c).

"I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions."

—bell hooks 1994 A.D. (Teaching to Transgress).

Recently, a fellow teacher told me he would skip teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to his class. He simply thought the work irrelevant. In a mandatory workshop some time later, my school's teachers were asked to consider, "what systems at your school are asking your students to change, instead of asking you and your building to change?" Students were not to be taught; they were to be observed.

These incidents were reflective of larger trends. In classroom after classroom, my school would no longer impose curricular mandates or behavioral norms. The classical Socratic ideals of a nurtured soul had been replaced by the chronic scent of marijuana in my school's hallways. Our schools had traded teaching men to love what is beautiful with encouraging and enabling the transgressions of youth.

How did this transition happen? When did we decide on this new conception of the purpose of education? Or rather, when did we abandon the educational ideals that preceded the sad imitation of an educational purpose we are left with today? More importantly, how can we make things right?

A Brief History of Educational Thought, Part I

Though ostensibly a tract on justice, Plato's *Republic* has one question at its core: what should we teach our children? In the mind of Socrates, the answer to that question forms the basis of any society and so of justice itself, making *Republic* one of the earliest tracts on education.

Plato eludes specific recommendations for reading and instruction but insists that "the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thought." He argued—as Paul did in his letter to the Philippians—that if our children direct their thoughts towards what is pure, lovely, and admirable, their lives will be likewise. If instead they meditate upon the vice present in the poetry of Plato's time or the pop culture of ours, their lives will follow suit.

After Plato, Quintilian was a precursor to modern theorists like John Dewey, emphasizing the need for oratorical competence much like the current simplistic focus on literacy and

job-skills. Yet educational historian Robert Rusk notes that even Quintilian “would rather recommend the training of a child in uprightness than in eloquent speaking.” It’s better a student’s character be virtuous than that he or she gain some skill for the future.

To their detriment, Plato and Quintilian prescribed their educational program only to an elite cadre of philosopher-kings. Advanced education remained a matter of aristocratic concern for centuries. To address this deficiency, the *Ratio Studiorum* of the Jesuit movement and the thought of Ignatius Loyola attempted to create systematic rules and curriculum to universalize education away from its former elitism.

The Jesuits agreed with Plato and Socrates that education benefitted “their own and their neighbours’ souls.” They set forth a sequence of learning that proceeded from language and art to end in philosophy and theology. Students were to use Latin whenever possible. In contrast to the caricature of Catholic education as cold and austere, Loyola advocated games, good-natured competition between students, and a commitment on the part of instructors to “always govern by love.”

The education of these early theorists sought to nurture the soul, to cleanse it of corruption, to enliven and vivify its vision of the world. Their techniques and systems varied, but undergirding it all was the notion that a pursuit of the good and truth itself was their ultimate goal. There were certain things students ought to know and think, and it was the job of schools to pass those along.

Part II: Decline and Fall

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the first to question these paradigms in his tract *Emile, On Education* (1762). Rousseau argued that schools play no part in the development of character or the alignment of student sensibilities toward the good. Rather, human nature is perfect outside of societal corruption and so children should follow their natural inclination.

But it wasn’t until John Dewey popularized Rousseau’s ideas that education turned away from its classical roots *en masse*. Dewey undercut the foundational idea of education up to that point—that schools had something important to teach. In his book *Experience and Education*, he wrote that “there is no subject that is in and of itself...such that inherent educational value can be attributed to it.” Neither Tolstoy nor Shakespeare, germ theory nor individual rights are worth teaching in themselves.

Content, in Dewey’s mind, was neutral so long as it kept the student’s interest and provided a medium through which a teacher could foster other skills. From this observation, a litany of directions recommend themselves to discredit Dewey’s materialism: does the past not have value? Does the West not have a culture worth preserving? Does the Constitution or Beethoven not carry inherent worth regardless of a student’s passing interests?

For the moment, I focus on what has been lost: the pursuit and instruction into virtue and aesthetic ideals. Dewey trained children into the economy; he thought their ultimate aspiration should be to produce goods and services as workers in America’s factories and industries, never mind their character.

With classics and curriculum decentered, Dewey left a vacuum that deconstructionists, Marxists, and feminists like Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks happily filled. Over time, a consensus emerged that education exists not to shape a young mind but to interrogate and break down the structures undergirding society itself. Any imposition of behavioral norms or content must therefore result from sexism, racism, or hegemony, and so should be done away with. Hence, bell hooks “celebrate[s] teaching that enables transgressions.”

Western education, then, began with the Socratic idea that through the consideration of art and philosophy man strives outside himself in pursuit of the common good. From there, Dewey reduced instruction to economic training but at least maintained some endorsement of the American system. The radicals of the mid-20th century, though, educated to deconstruct not just ethics but the system itself, extending beyond Dewey's indifference to morals to an outright rejection of them.

A Collage of Modern Education

As it currently stands, our modern public schools are a hodgepodge of these competing theories. Most still follow some semblance of Loyola's example by assigning a curriculum of significant literature, historical events, and scientific concepts. The Common Core is a distillation of Dewey's job skills. Restorative justice and choice reading seek to restructure the content and behavioral norms within a school as progressive theorists recommend.

I do not intend to provide here the most egregious or shocking anecdotes that one can find about public schools. Such examples are unfortunately common, but easy to wield in defense of any theory. Instead I'll focus on the movements and practices that best represent the ideological shift in education that has occurred through the past century, what's happening at the upper echelons of educational thought—not to debunk every practice in its entirety, but to connect it to the larger ideological movement away from classical ideals.

I begin with my teacher training at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a program that competes with Harvard and Columbia in terms of prestige. I mention their status because teachers and administrators across the country follow and mimic the research, theory, and instruction coming from them.

Take their literary theory, for example. My professor set up tables representing approaches to literature, and we moved from station to station analyzing the same poem through a different lens—feminist theory, critical race theory, Marxist, and deconstructionist. Echoing the work of Michel Foucault, we treated texts as artifacts—opportunities to examine power and prejudice. Reading became an anthropological search for “injustices” with little interest in authorial intent.

Take for example *To Kill a Mockingbird*—nearly ubiquitous across high school curricula. A critical theory approach to the book would put the focus on race relations, or on the protagonist's discomfort with her gender role. Pertinent discussions, yes, but they obscure and neglect the novel's engagement with ideals of fatherhood, models of behavior in an unjust world, and critiques of the justice system. And so, with every book, students learn the same narrative of oppression. The author's own philosophy eludes them.

It's true that in order to develop healthy psyches and sound judgment, children need to interrogate various worldviews. But they also need something concrete to grasp in the end. In the real world, the intent of demolition (or “deconstruction” as it's called in literary theory) is to build something greater in place of what gets torn down.

Another central tenet of my graduate training was restorative justice—the idea that misbehavior stems from broken systems, not people—and its implementation through “restorative circles.” During one experiential session, we sat around a table and made friendship bracelets. At another, we passed around a “talking piece,” in this case a popsicle stick with googly eyes. At my school, an office referral garners a “restorative circle,” wherein an offending student talks to a counselor in place of standard detentions or suspensions.

Again, the underlying theory posits that any misbehavior signals the need for accommodation on the part of the school and not the correction of adolescent immaturity. Accordingly, a RAND study, celebrated in the media for linking restorative justice to a reduction in disciplinary disparities, found students reporting a deterioration of classroom behavior and an uptick in school bullying. At my former school, a child could cuss out a teacher and face little more than a short conversation with a counselor. As the RAND study outlines, suspensions decreased; behavior worsened.

The final movement I'll discuss here is the proliferation of student choice within school curricula. The most influential (or infamous depending on one's view) advocate for such practices is Lucy Calkins, director of the Reading & Writing Project at Columbia University and author of the [Units of Study](#). Although labeled a "curriculum," it is more accurate to call the Units a teaching style, wherein students choose their books to read—almost exclusively young adult fiction—and design their writing projects.

For a few years, my school mandated I use Calkins' system. It amounted to two 45-minute blocks of reading wherein I was supposed to walk around the room and conference one-on-one with kids in the class. At my current job, I observe many teachers. The best struggle to get any students to finish self-selected books; the worst can at least stumble through the *Odyssey* with their students following along.

There are countless more movements and fads within modern education that I leave unaddressed here. But these three are enough to paint a picture. Students follow their own insular whims, beholden to no expectations. If ever they are exposed to anything like an ideal, it is only so they can be told to deconstruct it. If tests are to be believed, these students leave high school with increasingly lower reading abilities and less knowledge of history. They leave without skills, knowledge, or character.

A Conservative Failure

Throughout the 20th century, conservatives fought to hold ground in the public schools against this movement away from the common good into crass personal fulfillment. Prominent works like Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) or Dorothy Sayers's *Lost Tools of Learning* (1947) decry the effects of an education removed from its classical roots. Personally, I prefer the image C.S. Lewis furnishes in *The Abolition of Man* (1943) of "men without chests": we decry ideals like honor and are surprised to find cowards in our midst.

Since the canon wars of the '90s, conservatives have ceded ground. Most modern debates focus not on what is to be taught but on neoliberal policy like charter schools and voucher systems. I myself am an advocate for both but lament the few conversations being had about curricula or educational philosophy. That's not to say there are no such discussions. There's a powerful argument coming from think tanks like The Fordham Institute and individual professors like Timothy Shanahan. Unfortunately, they make their case on progressive grounds.

They draw their ideas from an influential academic named E.D. Hirsch. The central thesis of Hirsch's work *Cultural Literacy* is that historically significant texts are necessary in school curricula not so that students will develop some set of esoteric "skills" but rather so they will accumulate background knowledge. Consider the difficulty an American academic would have reading a paragraph on cricket, or practically anyone would have reading the *New York Times's* 1619 Project without knowledge of American slavery or the Constitution. In other words, the ability to read and think critically depends not on some neutral "skills" but rather on a broad knowledge of history, science, and important works of literature.

Phrased differently, there's a cliché that schools should teach students how to think but

not what to think. According to Hirsch, the reverse is true. Teaching students how to think begins with teaching them what to think. Give them something to think about. Nothing comes from nothing.

This argument is both persuasive and influential. Notable charter networks like Uncommon Schools base their curriculum on these theories, taking their students through historically significant, complex texts in a teacher-centered classroom. As such, while America's scores on reading and history dropped last year for the first time in 25 years, Uncommon Schools continue to [outperform](#) affluent districts while serving disproportionately poor students.

While influential, this line of reasoning alone is insufficient. It cedes ground as it makes the case for classical education. In place of reading Shakespeare or Plato for their own beauty, we should read Shakespeare and Plato because they're better for literacy. In trying to escape his influence, the argument falls back upon Dewey's view that education exists to prepare students for the economy. It rejects his *how* but maintains his *why*.

Toward a Common Good Education

The goal is to return our education to Socratic ideals, to offer an education that raises our citizenry to the good, the true, and the beautiful and in doing so creates a more just society. Ultimately, that means contention on conservative grounds with the above practices and theories now so prevalent in our school. But the plan for doing so needn't remain entirely in the abstract; there are concrete policies that can assist the restoration of education. Here I recommend a few.

Deregulation is a good place to begin. Common Core, standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, the IDEA Act, behavioral mandates via executive order, Race to the Top, charter school caps, union power, and the near-endless minutiae on the regulatory books hamper schools' ability to change. That's not to say that all regulations are bad. The IDEA Act, at least theoretically, ensures an adequate education for students with cognitive disabilities. But its application has brought with it a mountain of paperwork so that special ed teachers spend more time jumping through regulatory hoops than actually assisting students. With less regulation, schools will have space to reorder themselves along classical lines.

That having been said, there's a more fundamental principle to deregulation: localism. Until the cultural attitude towards classical education changes, any new administration could repeal any policy battle previously won. Local districts have far more control than most realize. A small team of teachers designed my curriculum. While they took some guidance from the common core, ultimately what they read, how they read it, and the method of instruction remained a question of local control.

Whereas the trite call to contact your local politician has little effect, sending letters to school board members, calling teachers, speaking before the board, and other such local advocacy can do wonders. As a teacher myself, I struggle to push against the grain. If I knew a parent group or cadre of professors at the local college fought in support of classical education, I'd feel more empowered myself to buck any district trends.

If any focus remains at the federal level, it should be directed toward Common Core. As it stands, Common Core isn't a bad idea per se—creating a loose curriculum that all public schools are expected to follow is in principle a valuable impulse. However, in practice the Common Core is Deweyism condensed.

For those unfamiliar, Common Core is a progression of skills that a child should master by the time they graduate high school. They range from simple things like identifying

words of emotion in 1st grade, to using textual citations, to explaining and defending inferences drawn from a text.

There are two criticisms to level at Common Core as it currently exists. The first comes from the pragmatic traditionalism of Hirsch. A complex reading skill like drawing inferences from a text isn't really a skill. Many of my students who come from other countries are incapable of parsing out the subtlety of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it's not for lack of some abstract skill—they can infer plenty from text messages that remain incomprehensible to me. Rather, it's that they have no knowledge of American history, racial tensions, Jim Crow Laws, protestant dogmatism, and the like, and so any subtlety is lost on them.

The other criticism returns to philosophical groundings. In Common Core's current state, a child could select a young adult fiction novel celebrating drug culture and still meet every major requirement. This federal curriculum maintains Dewey's neutrality, pushing skills over knowledge, economy over character.

In place of some abstract list, a superior Common Core would instead list content ideas worthy of instruction from which local districts choose. Such an endeavor has already begun. Following Hirsch's tradition, Eric Lui of the Aspen Institute established a [website](#) to track people's lists of what they think every American should know. There's a pretty broad consensus, including slavery, the Constitution, and the holocaust.

Admittedly, I would care less for what would ultimately end up on the list and more about its very existence. In curating a broad list of topics from which schools could choose, such a federal curriculum would maintain a cultural adherence to aesthetic and moral ideals, affirming that some ideas are worth learning in themselves and that it is up to adults, not children, to determine what those things are.

Various publications like *First Things* are attempting to replace "liberty" with "common good" as a first principle of conservatism. I'm sympathetic to these attempts, but even Sohrab Ahmari in *First Things* [acknowledges](#) "the great horror of the state, traditional authority, and the use of public power to advance the common good" on the part of the American people. Education is one realm where public power can advance the common good without stepping beyond its constitutional bounds. It could therefore represent a policy platform for both neo- and post-liberals.

In Conclusion

The best reform that can happen occurs in the classroom itself within the teacher's own personal purview. It's near imperceptible. It's a change I made a few years into my teaching career. Immediately after my graduate training at UW-Madison, I was a practitioner for student choice and restorative justice. But I have since adopted classical beliefs.

This last year my school expelled one boy until the end of the semester for starting a multi-student brawl in the lunchroom. When his expulsion was up, he joined my classroom. Previously, our system had fed him a meager diet of choice reading and progressive ideology, perhaps thinking classic works of literature would be irrelevant. I finally taught him Shakespeare as if his plays had something important to say in my student's life.

Near the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, my student and I read about the miscreants "that quench the fire of their pernicious rage." It took some vocabulary work but once he got it, he blurted out, "I know exactly how that feels." After that, he came to me when he was angry. By the end of the play, having seen the actions of Romeo, he at least acknowledged that his wanton approach to sexuality and violence had real

implications in this world, and that self-restraint was difficult but necessary.

Perhaps a progressive educator would see my changes, consider them authoritarian, and expect a class riot in response to such overbearing inclinations. Quite the opposite happened.

After one open-ended discussion about what Juliet should do facing an abhorrent marriage or disownment, one student came up to me and said “that was the most fun I’ve ever had in an English class. This book helps me understand what I’m supposed to do in my life.” The students appreciated the concrete models and thought experiments that the play provided: Juliet’s relation to her abusive parents; Romeo’s grappling with his father-figure, the Friar; adolescent passions; and unchecked rage.

Perhaps most moving, at the end of the semester, a student wrote me a letter. Normally, such things talk about how fun a class was or how much a student enjoys a teacher’s classroom presence. Instead, this student thanked me for showing her how much books had to teach. She used the book not to extract a modicum of skills that one day in the future would pay off but rather to derive models for her to interrogate her life in the moment. From them she learned philosophy, history, personal virtue, vocabulary, and more.

Socrates believed that a just society stemmed from what we taught our children. We therefore have a duty to provide them with the best. Without Fredrick Douglass, how could we have rooted out slavery? Without the Gospels, how would Christian humility have become a virtue instead of an apparent weakness? It is through objective appeals to the greatest ideas that liberal societies can winnow through falsity and truth, the beautiful and the foul, the desirable and the abhorrent. To relativize them away is to leave future generations defenseless.

[Daniel Buck](#) is a teacher in Wisconsin with a master’s in education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also is the columnist editor for Lone Conservative, an organization dedicated to mentoring and publishing the next generation of conservative advocates.